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Speech by Mary Gusella, Chief Commissioner, presented on April 13, 2005 at the 61st Session of the Annual Meeting of the International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

Mr. Chairman,
Honorable Delegates,
Dear Colleagues,

It is beyond a doubt that National Human Rights Institutions are an integral part of international efforts to promote a culture of human rights. It is through such institutions that the hopes and aspirations for a better world, some birthed within this very Commission, are translated into reality, providing an essential link between human rights ideals and the people of the world.

Report on Progress by the CHRC through the Change Agenda

As my colleague, Ms. Mary MacLennan, noted last year before this Commission, the Canadian Human Rights Commission has faced a number of challenges in the past several years, and has undergone a dynamic period of change and growth in both areas of its mandate - human rights and employment equity.

In order to improve the efficiency of processing and resolving human rights complaints, greater focus has been placed on the use of alternative dispute resolution, streamlining the investigation process and the overall management of complaints. With respect to employment equity, the Commission continues to strive toward the most effective use of resources to ensure compliance with the Employment Equity Act.

The leadership of the Commission is committed to a culture of innovation and continuous improvement, as well as a respectful and productive environment. To this end, the initial focus of our reform was on improvements to the CHRC's internal business processes, which resulted in a higher corporate performance. As internal management improved, it allowed us to concentrate greater resources to carry out our mandate externally, in the protection and promotion of human rights.

We are pleased to say that CHRC's annual reports continue to show improvements in efficiency and productivity. In fact, between December 2002 and December 2004, the number of final decisions on cases has increased 70%, the number of active cases over two years old has dropped by two thirds, and the average age of cases has decreased from 25 months to 12 months, about a 50% improvement.

The next phase of this process will be two-fold. It will involve applying greater resources to focus on discrimination prevention through providing information to the public. And secondly, it will address key human rights concerns through issue-specific reports, to investigate systemic issues that impact specific groups of people, or the human rights system as a whole.

The CHRC's experience has demonstrated that, in order to make progress, there must be objective standards of measurement, a set of indicators to monitor performance and progress on a regular basis, both as a body meant to protect and promote human rights, and as an institution requiring legitimacy, accountability and competence. As we work toward the highest possible performance, three areas - case management, discrimination prevention and research - remain the guideposts for the Commission's activities in the coming years, and provide a framework for the fulfillment of our mandate.

Role of National Institutions in the CHR and other UN Bodies

Throughout the process of change, a great deal of knowledge and experience has been gained; valuable insights that the CHRC intends to share, and build upon. As the role of national institutions evolves, it is important to remember that success cannot only be achieved through looking inward. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience contained within national institutions around the world which we can all use constructively.

National institutions must continue to participate in a supportive and advisory capacity. The invitation by the General Assembly for their involvement in the drafting process of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities was a welcome sign of trust and respect.

With such encouragement and goodwill in the United Nations, it is incumbent upon the ICC to ensure a certain standard is met by national institutions through strict adherence to the Paris Principles and a rigorous, systematic accreditation system. Such mutual understanding and cooperation will lead to the advancement of the causes we are here to pursue at the 61st session.

Migration and National Institutions

One such cause is that of migrants, whether they be migrant workers, refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, or victims of trafficking. The issue of migration is now recognized globally as a critical human rights concern.

The Seoul Declaration was drafted this past September at the Seventh International Conference for National Institutions. In recognition of the concerns over migrants' rights, the Declaration has a section especially devoted to the issues of migration, and the challenges faced to ensure their human rights. One month later, the Zacatecas Declaration reaffirmed the dedication of national institutions to the protection of migrants' rights.

To this end, national institutions can play a positive role in several respects. They can promote more extensive ratification of these standards by States, and the implementation of the attached obligations at the national level. National institutions can also engage in bi- or multi-lateral cooperation to address issues of migration, and engage in regional framework building to monitor irregular migration. Within their own countries, they can create awareness and information campaigns, establish investigative and reporting processes, propose legislation, promote dialogue and encourage the creation of mechanisms for assistance to migrants.

Through these sorts of efforts by national institutions - in combination with continuing dialogue and cooperation with governments and UN bodies - we can help ensure the protection of the civil, political, economic and social rights of one of the most vulnerable groups of people worldwide.

Conclusion

In conclusion, national human rights institutions are essential for the promotion and protection of human rights. This has been reaffirmed within the United Nations, and numerous international, regional and national bodies. Nationally, through our own efforts to ensure the highest performance possible, and internationally, by a strong ICC accreditation

process and adherence to the Paris Principles, we hope this relationship will continue to grow, so that together we can fulfill the promise of universal human rights.

Last Updated: 2004-07-06